

## In brief

### Increasing number of people in UK diagnosed with HIV:

According to the Public Health Laboratory Service, the number of HIV infections diagnosed in the United Kingdom in 1999 is set to be the highest for any year in the 1990s—2457 reports have already been received—and there has been an increase in the number of heterosexually acquired infections. The report can be accessed at [www.phls.co.uk](http://www.phls.co.uk).

### UK anti-euthanasia bill is given second reading:

The Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia) Bill (29 January, p 319) has received a second reading in the House of Commons and been referred to a standing committee.

### WHO launches commission on economics and health:

The World Health Organisation has launched the Commission on Macroeconomics and Health, which will study how concrete health interventions can lead to economic growth and reduce inequity in developing countries. Chaired by Harvard professor Dr Jeffrey Sachs, the commission includes several leading economists and economic policymakers.

### FDA warns about heartburn drug:

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned that the popular heartburn drug cisapride can cause dangerous irregular heartbeats and even sudden death and should be used only as a last resort in patients with severe gastroesophageal reflux disease when other treatments have failed. Full story in News Extra at [www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com).

### Bill proposed to strengthen powers of General Medical Council:

The Consumers' Association in Britain is supporting a 10 minute rule bill being put forward by the MP Linda Perham which will give the GMC greater powers to ban dangerous doctors for life.

News extra **BMJ**

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## Surgeon amputated healthy legs

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

A surgeon in Scotland amputated the legs of two psychologically disturbed men who had nothing physically wrong with them but felt a "desperate" need to be amputees, it emerged this week.

Both men, one from England and one from Germany, had a rare type of body dysmorphic disorder known as apotemnophilia, in which patients are convinced from childhood that they will be normal only once a limb has been removed. The obsession is always with the removal of a specific limb, and each patient had a leg amputated above the knee.

The operations were carried out in September 1997 and April 1999 at an NHS hospital, Falkirk and District Royal Infirmary, by consultant surgeon Robert Smith. Both men had been turned away by other doctors.

The chairman and board members of Forth Valley Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which

runs the hospital, were unaware of the operations at the time. They only learnt of them last summer when Mr Smith informed the trust's new chief executive, Jim Currie, that he was involved in assessing a third patient, an American.

This week the trust announced a ban on further amputations after a report from its ethics subcommittee. Mr Smith had obtained the agreement of the then chief executive and medical director, both of whom have since changed jobs, before performing the two operations.

He also discussed the procedure with his defence body and with the ethics committee of the General Medical Council. The patients, who had failed to respond to conventional treatment, were assessed and counselled beforehand by psychiatrists and a psychologist.

Mr Smith told the *BMJ* that he accepted no fee for the operations, though the hospital was paid £3000 (\$4800). "The money went back into the NHS."

He said that there were two groups of patients who wanted to have limbs amputated. The larger group found the concept

sexually arousing. But both patients on whom he operated were a small subgroup who wanted the operation because they felt incomplete with four limbs but would feel complete with three.

Patients with the disorder often resorted to self harm—for example, by shooting their leg off or lying on a railway track, added Mr Smith. "They are a very strange group of people who have had this obsession since childhood. The more I saw these patients, the more I realised this was an extremely distressing and disabling condition."

He said that the patients' lives had been transformed by losing a limb and they were delighted with their new state. Both had had artificial limbs fitted, though they did not always wear them.

Earlier, he told a press conference at the hospital: "At the end of the day I have no doubt that what I was doing was the correct thing for those patients."

The trust's chairman, Ian Mullen, said such operations were not ruled out for the future, but a strict procedure would have to be followed. □

## College begins inquiry into removal of wrong kidney

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

The Royal College of Surgeons this week began an inquiry into how the wrong, healthy kidney was removed from a patient at Prince Philip Hospital, Llanelli, Wales.

The surgical team involved in the incident has been relieved

of operating duties and consultant urologist Dr John Roberts is taking leave. Similar operations at the hospital have been suspended.

Hospital managers say that before the incident, which left the patient, Graham Reeves,

seriously ill with one diseased kidney, nurses at the hospital had told managers of their concerns about urological procedures and that a clinical audit had been initiated.

"Earlier this month nursing colleagues expressed concern about some of the outcomes following urological procedures to the hospital management. Action was taken immediately, the consultant urologist interviewed, and as a result he agreed that an audit of his work would be appropriate. A sample of 400 cases was agreed covering approximately one year's work," said Mike Ones, chief executive of the Carmarthenshire NHS Trust.

He added, "There was an occasion in September 1999 when the medical director discussed an operation which had taken place earlier that year in July. This discussion was in relation to operations carried out on high risk patients."

The trust has launched its own inquiry into the kidney operation that went wrong. □



Dr John Roberts: at the centre of controversy over kidney operation

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